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ABSTRACT

In a high school writing workshop, students frequently would go through multiple essay drafts and conferences with the teacher and fellow students before realizing that their theses were incorrect. A teacher devised the "lexivision" to address this problem. Students used Venn diagrams, graphs, or flow charts to represent concepts in the texts they read. The students were to indicate quotations from the text to support their representations and to include their own or others' ideas that they felt related to the topic. A teacher-prepared diagram based upon Milton's "Paradise Lost" served as a model. As other students observed the work of the junior honors English class, they asked to undertake similar assignments. A college preparatory writing class prepared lexivisions as small group projects. The collaboration involved in lexivisions seems to be the key to successful, well thought out work. The real strength of the assignment is drawing out student explanations of why they have portrayed their interpretations of a given text in particular ways. Lexivisions encourage students to interact with new knowledge and to relate old and new knowledge in a creative synthesis, instead of emphasizing mere recall or analysis. Such creativity can help students address future problems, envision solutions, and dream undreamed ideas. (SG)

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LEXIVISIONS: MAKING MEANING THROUGH IMAGING

by

Linda Iovino

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I believe that critical thinking and literacy began when the first cavewoman, bored with waiting for her great hunter, lay down the sleeping babe, plucked a charred stick from the edges of the fire, and drew a circle on the rough walls of her cave. Although the round, crude figure provided no physical warmth on this grey dawn, the cavewoman was warmed: she had captured the sun and she was dizzy with the power that had reached beyond the cave, the hills, and the clouds to bring this god to her wall.

How could I, an English teacher, ever overlook the power of the symbol? Somehwere I seem to have gotten lost on the one-way street of Writing As the Only Way of Making Meaning. I assigned papers, analyses, essays--the written work became the way to make meaning for me, the primary way to represent knowledge, comprehension, engagement. Yet everyday I read short stories and novels that enact themselves in my mind. I have visions and re-visions. I see Heathcliffe, with the scowling brow and sculpted jaw, storm across the moor; when the sky grows purple as heath, I trace the agony in every desperate gesture as he demands Catherine back from the weaker forces that detain her. Images and words shape my visions. Obviously, I needed to stop undervaluing visual meaning-making and exploit the students' untapped abilities in this learning mode by combining them with written meaning-making.

The Problem

Although the Writing Workshop emphasizes first drafts, second drafts, and conferences with the teacher and other students, I frequently found my students were well into their literary analyses before I or they detected flaws, misreadings, or oversights in their arguments. When confronted with an ambiguous or perplexing story or novel, students frequently grasp the first idea that seems to make some sense of a confusing text. Such grasping is not confined to studens, however, as we all usually accept the first lifesaver thrown our way when we are in waters over our heads instead of waiting for the lifesaver of the correct dimensions or color. Whereas grabbing the first lifesaver is good advice for castaways on the high seas, such action frequently limits our interaction with ambiguous or

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disquieting texts. When we grab a lifesaver in interpreting fiction, we often limit our view to what we can see through the hole in it, disregarding all additional material as peripheral. And what positive assistance can the teacher provide when she discovers that her students are focusing on the peripheral and ignoring the shark fin bearing down on them, if she waits until they are chin-deep in introductions, supporting evidence, and selected quotations?

Although I'm certain many teachers manage to have conferences with their students before they have established idea ownership, I have been unable to do this successfully. I wanted to devise a method of discussing--not directing--students' concepts before they had invested so much effort in an interpretation that they were determined to hang on to it even if it meant consciously ignoring all contradictory evidence.

For example, I asked a student, "How does this theory explain Satan's attractiveness in the first two books of Paradise Lost?"

The student patiently explained, "It doesn't. I'm just looking at what a mel he is in the last books."

"But your thesis asserts: 'In Paradise Lost Milton depicts Satan as disgusting and vile.' Doesn't he seem rather noble and courageous in the first two books?"

"Yeah, actually I liked him then. He reminded me of my cousin--he won't put up with anyone jerking him around. But I've already written a page and a half about how disgusting he is."

Fortunately for Albert he could amend his thesis to: "After Book Six of Paradise Lost Milton depicts..." Unfortunately, such a simple solution rarely occurs, and either the student decides to continue with his thesis--even though he has come to believe that it is probably seriously flawed--or he reluctantly and halfheartedly starts over. I decided that one way to circumvent this situation was to invent the lexivision.

Words and Images

With visions of Heathcliffe spinning in my head, I decided to have the students use Venn diagrams, graphs, or flow charts to visually represent a concept or concepts in the text. At the time my junior honors class was

reading Paradise Lost, and Milton's ideas of God, the universe, original sin, free will, Heaven, Hell, good, and evil were spinning in their heads. As my students were beginning to comprehend Milton's inverted syntax, I thought we might as well begin to delineate his concepts.

I introduced the lexivision concept (*lexi* - word; *vision* - a mental image produced by the imagination) by drawing my own visual composite of how I envisioned Milton's universe. As I drew, I realized I had to keep referring to the text to make certain that I was accurately depicting the relationship existing between the objects and the characters in the epic. In order to explain each concept clearly, I decided to put quotations in appropriate areas to explain and reinforce my vision. Although I'm not an artist, I used a compass and a ruler to delineate, separate, interrelate, and indicate the aspects of Milton's universe as I saw them in my mind. I enjoyed composing my first lexivision, and I became very aware of the critical thinking skills I was using to determine exactly how the circle representing Satan intersected with the spheres representing Hell, Chaos, and Heaven (Fig. 1). Drawing on my own lexivision helped me to establish some of the guidelines I wanted my students to follow in constructing their diagrams with quotations:

1. Select an idea, concept, or theme to explore in a lexivision.
2. No circle, picture, or visual representation should be drawn on the page unless you have a specific justification for placing each in just that location and relationship to the other symbols on the page. (This restriction compels the students to critically examine several different ideas, characters, or concepts simultaneously and to determine how these interact.)
3. Include pertinent quotations from the text.
4. Clearly label all parts of the diagram.
5. Use graphic or visual aids, such as colors, textures, or similarities in shapes, to illustrate relationships.
6. Include any of your own or others' ideas, theories, or archetypes that you feel relate to, resonate with, or enhance your topic. (In their Milton lexivisions my students intersected Greek mythology with many of the topics they illustrated.)

I showed the students my lexivision of Milton's cosmology. I hoped it would serve as a much-needed model for what the students might perceive as an abstract and vague assignment. I generally prefer presenting

assignments that have some ambiguity and require students to define their own problems or areas for investigation, but I wanted the method of discovery to be the lexivision. I wanted them to see it as a useful tool--not as a roadblock in their search for meaning. For that reason I emphasized the known methods of chartmaking: graphs, Venn diagrams, flow charts, and bar graphs. As they were all familiar with these forms, my model just showed them how to include quotations, and to depict spatial, emotional, psychological, and intellectual relationships using graphs.

When I presented this assignment to my class, I was answered with the usual groans and protests.

"Draw a picture? Is this art class?"

"I can't draw! This is going to ruin my average. Why can't we just write an analysis?"

"I know just what I'm going to do. I'll draw prelapsarian and postlapsarian Adam and Eve, and I'll show all the forces pulling on them and them pulling on each other and I'll use different colors to be good and evil."

"How much will this affect our grade?"

So far, so good. I logged in my research journal: "Typical reaction to assignment."

I required the first lexivision to be an individual project that would be presented in rough draft form to a small group for their input. Their rough drafts of the lexivisions were very much like the rough drafts of their literary analyses. Some were sketchy and poorly thought out; others were elaborate explorations of the dominant themes in Paradise Lost. The small group discussions, however, galvanized student involvement in lexivisions.

As I wandered through the groups, I heard excited voices explaining each item and quotation on their lexivisions.

"See, I used the intersecting gyres from "The Second Coming" to show good moving to evil and some evil still in the good (Fig. 2). Then I put Adam and

Eve in the center and they're being pulled both ways..."

"On the left her is Milton. He's in dark glasses because he's blind, but he can hear the Heavenly Muse up here in Heaven (Fig. 3). And I put the fallen angels' names in a diagonal line to show them going down into 'darkness visible.'"

These were the first comments from the students who were proud of their work. Gradually, the excited voices diminished and I was aware of generally apologetic tones explaining their work.

"Well, I don't know why I put Beelzebub here. He should be right next to Satan. And I like the way Berneice drew Mammon with the face of a coin. I'm going to put... Wasn't it Beelzebub who had the Atlantean shoulders? I know how to fix this..."

As students explained their lexivisions, I heard them exploring the concepts that inform Paradise Lost. They were actually arguing and flipping through the text to find out if Milton had really said the pendent would was hanging in a chain or if foreknowledge had any power over free will or if Adam had eaten the forbidden fruit undeceived (Fig. 4).

Although two or three of the rough drafts were only slightly altered, most of the students' final lexivisions were true re-visions.

Jim's depiction of the blind Milton looking at a diminished Heaven, a lost Eden, and a flaming Hell was accorded mild acclaim until Leila pointed out that from a distance she could see that Jim had drawn Milton's whole creation story in the shape of a uterus. Cosequently, Jim was honored for his apocalyptic vision by the ultimate act of appreciation in junior honors-The Wave.

Beyond Milton

I displayed the lexivisions in my room, and my other students became curious. When my college preparatory writing class wanted to know why I had so many Satanic drawings on display, I explained some of the concepts depicted in the lexivisions. They wanted to draw them for the stories they were analyzing for a critical analysis. As I hadn't really planned to use lexivisions with this class, I let them create their diagrams as small group projects.

Again I walked around the room listening to their interactions. Students kept referring to the story and reading quotations to each other. Some grops were in heated debates, others drew disconnected circles and kept asking for me to help get them started. I declined, but I watched these groups with interest when the groups that had produced flow charts and Venn diagrams began explaining their lexivisions, and, consequently, their interpretation of the story to the class. One group wanted to stop in the middle of this sharing so they could regroup and "really draw something."

"Now we get it," Ben said. "Let us have a few minutes. Those guys are all wrong."

Opening Doors

The key to receiving successful and well-thought out lexivisions seems to be the sharing and collborative work. Some students take the assignment and run; others are tentative until they see the products others create.

The real strength of the lexivision, however, is not in the drawing itself or the quotations. It is in the students' explanation of why he/she/they depict the interpretations in that specific way. As each one talks his lexivision through to a small group or to the class, he seems to reaffirm/confirm an interpretation. As Sheila said to me after class, "I never knew I had so many things in my lexivision until I started explaining it to the class."

As this is the kind of discovery I want to encourage, I have learned to emphasize the explanation aspect of the lexivision. If I don't specifically point out that I want their explanations to include the ideas and relationships they have discovered, the students tend to offer very superficial explanations. I tell them this is their chance to point out and discuss the problems they encountered, the solutions they attempted, and the areas they feel are still ambiguous. I encourage the students to ask the presenters questions about their theories and conflicting theories, the placement of items, the omission of characters or ideas, and the most creative and most troublesome aspects of the lexivisions. Frequently, this questioning produces tensions that the students want to explore and generates disagreements that open up areas we have not examined in the classroom.

Higher Literacy

The skeptical say, "So what? Now we have something for our display cases. Big deal!"

And I agree. It is a big deal, but then I've bought into John S. Mayher's Uncommon Sense. I believe that "we learn by constructing our mental theory or our story of the way the world works" and that language's "most essential and characteristic function is in thinking, building mental models, and employing them to understand the world" (122).

If we want our students to use their language, intelligence and knowledge, then we need to provide opportunities for them to develop the skills to do this successfully. Lexivisions encourage students to interactwith new knowledge, to relate old and new knowledge in a creative synthesis instead of emphasizing mere recall or analysis. In this manner, "The teacher does not give students knowledge; they create it for themselves in an environmentthat sparks and rewards creative ideas" (Sternberg, 8). Obviously, this gives the teacher the bet job in the universe: creating an environment that sparks and rewards ideas.

These are the skills that must inform the higher literacy of the future, and I want lexivisions to be a means of encouraging students to combine "both knowing and doing in a transactional relationship through which the doing affects the knowing and the knowing affects the doing," so that the result will be "a new synthesis of personal knowledge for the reflective practitioner wich is greater than either alone" (Sternberg, 8). By providing opportunities for our students to develop new ways of perceiving and exploring problems, we foster the thinking that will address future problems, envision solutions, and dream undreamed ideas.

Through the Mirror

As Mayher points out, language's "most essential and characteristic function is in thinking, building mental models, and employing them to understand the world" (122). The lexivision can enhance the students' use of "narrative modes of thinking and the experience of telling (or writing) and listening to (or reading) stories" by "placing the student at the cneter of the learning process as a meaning maker, not only as a meaning receiver" (103). Additionally, the interaction of several domains in completing a lexivision increases the liklihood that these skills will be transfered to other problems in other disciplines.

Through lexivisions I have seen students take on topics and concepts that are more complex and challenging than my previous students have broached in their literary analyses (Fig. 5). In the future I want to investigate the effect lexivisions may have on the students' written work (Fig. 6). I would like to see if constructing a lexivision on a complex topic prompts students to risk writing a paper on an idea they would like to explore even if they do not feel they can dovetail all of their ideas into a watertight analysis. As a prelude to an essay or as an experiment with different--even apparently conflicting--beliefs, the lexivision can be a safe testing ground for fledgling ideas if the teacher rewards the students for what they do well. Because students' artistic and intellectual abilities vary greatly, I grade lexivisions by rewarding students for the effort expended, the challenge attempted, and the adherence to the six guidelines. As the integral part of the lexivision is the explanation of the selection and arrangement of quotations, characters, and ideas, the students earn a grade for their lexivisions and a separate grade for the explanations to the group or class. Ideally, the multi-media nature of the lexivision assignment should enable students to work in at least one area in which they excell.

As Alan Dugan writes, "Nothing is plumb, level, or square"; so why limit ourselves to looking for neatly packaged answers while avoiding the universal but frequently messy moral dilemmas confronting us (1037)? I want to see if the lexivision can be a vehicle for transporting students and teachers into realms we have been reluctant to explore in situations where grades are given.

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